

The Dialectics of Self and Space in Zackie Achmat's "My Childhood as an Adult Molester: A Salt River Moffie" (1995) and Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912)

Aman Sinha

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3099-2295>

University of Warwick, United Kingdom

aman.sinha@warwick.ac.uk

Abstract

In his 1995 short memoir titled "My Childhood as an Adult Molester" (1995), writer and activist Zackie Achmat reflects on his sexual experiences as a child and adolescent, engaging in sex with white adult men in a racially segregated Cape Town, during the 1970s and 80s. Through recurrent spatio-temporal shifts in the narrative, Achmat's autobiographical subject renders a violently segregated space and its cartography as permeable and fluid as the bodies that inhabit it. In this framework, a dialectic between space and subject construction emerges in which space writes the self, as much as the self writes the space. Desire is mapped onto momentary stasis rooted within the everyday, instead of a sovereign sexual subject navigating urban space. This conception operates in stark contrast to spatial engagements historically narrativised in Euro-American queer contexts. For instance, in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912), Aschenbach's pursuit of Tadzio in a disease-stricken Venice manifests at the narrative level as premonitions of his eventual demise. Even though Daniel Marshal argues that his pursuit is suggestive of a queer agent consciously redoing space-time, his relationship with the decaying urban space remains merely that—symbolic of his departure from normative engagements with space. Alternatively, Achmat's rendition offers a critique of racial and sexual normativity at multiple levels. It goes beyond a politics of identity-driven sexual morality, and offers a model of sexual subjectivity in which fighting both the racialisation and heterosexualisation of space operates as practices that are wound up with each other. In that sense, it provides a framework for locating possibilities of critique in queer literary production that aims at intertwining

UNISA 

Journal of Literary Studies

Volume 41 | 2025 | #19889 | 14 pages

 LASA

<https://doi.org/10.25159/1753-5387/19889>

ISSN 1753-5387 (Online)

© The Author(s) 2025



Published by the Literature Association of South Africa and Unisa Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

conceptions of queer freedom with protests against racial unevenness in 21st-century South Africa.

Keywords: public sex; HIV; apartheid; spatiality; postcolonialism; Zackie Achmat; Thomas Mann

At the very beginning of his memoir, with an epigraph from Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Zackie Achmat sets out his creative and political position against normative history. In the selected quotation, Rushdie speaks of his objective to counter purified accounts of family history by writing about things that have been rendered unspeakable. Achmat's choices as a memoirist also reflect this imperative to speak of instances from his past that official accounts of history would purposefully silence to reproduce sanitised narratives of family, lineage, and culture. However, as I go on to elucidate, the autobiographical act of making silenced queer histories visible does not imply an engagement with normative conceptions of identity and linear space-time. To explain this, I will read Achmat's story in relation to Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice* ([1912] 1998), while focusing on two inter-related aspects. I will argue that in creating a desiring child-subject who is also processing his location both within and beyond apartheid's regime, Achmat effectively counters the moralist characterisation of children as innocent and "uncorrupted," while navigating sexual curiosity within a system of legislated surveillance and segregation. His autobiographical subject operates by displacing sexual dissidence onto a series of material and spatial signifiers, instead of a preformed sense of self. Even though both the written and the writing subject identify themselves as gay, desire is always located in volatile spatio-temporal contexts, such as public washrooms within white designated areas, shared spaces within the home, classrooms, shebeens, compounds, and salons. This allows Achmat to exhibit how acquiring agency as a coloured gay subject was intimately tied with processing and defying the spatial politics of apartheid. I will also locate Achmat's text within the broader context of AIDS and HIV discourses in a newly democratic South Africa. At the time of his writing, an estimated 1.7 million adults were found to be infected with HIV according to the National Library of Medicine (Künster, Swanevelder, and Van Middelkoop 1998). This number was further exacerbated in the years of Thabo Mbeki's presidency, also known as the era of AIDS denialism. In repeatedly registering sexual agency in everyday moments of familial or communal contact, he further counters narratives of postcolonial recuperative nationalism that use the queer body as the site upon which they confront the nation's colonial history.

Achmat's focus instead is on the everyday, the non-monumental and minute moments of negotiating with structures of power. The memoir gives a brief account of his childhood, including details of migrating in between Johannesburg and Cape Town, exploring sexual possibilities within the surveilled environment of the coloured community in Salt River, leading up to the 1976 student uprising in Soweto as the year of his conscious political awakening. Throughout the text, however, the writing subject's lens keeps zooming in and out to posit disparate spatio-temporal memories in a dialectical relationship with each other. For instance, Achmat remembers how he and

his childhood friend Nomvula would “scream with fear and delight” as they would watch the police arrive near their yard to catch individuals in the supposed violation of the pass laws, only to realise a decade later that “almost 20 million men, women and children were thrown into prisons because of these laws” (Achmat 1995, 327). Situating memory within the framework of the quotidian allows the writing subject to go back and forth in time and map a multiplicity of instances through which he processes his surroundings. As a result, there is a spectre of fictionality that looms large over the narrative, in which the subject occupies multiple positions simultaneously.

The text itself begins with the assertion that the account rendered henceforth is a fantasy “because everything is a fantasy. There are no people called moffies. Children don’t have sex. Muslim men don’t beat or oppress their wives” (Achmat 1995, 325). In the very next section, the writing subject talks about his first sexual memory when he was three, of witnessing his parents having sex and thinking of his mother as unclean after that. The layered suggestiveness in this moment is worth noting. It would be erroneous to read this predominantly from the lens of the Freudian primal scene, the violent and untranslatable excess of sexual excitement. That is because the memory is textured with a certain tenderness, for it is also one of the rare times he remembers his parents sharing space without violence ensuing. “My dad hobbles across the room and starts serenading my mom in the most romantic deep voice. My mom is moved by Nat King Cole’s *Mona Lisa*. Her name is Mona. She rises from the bed where she is tending me” (Achmat 1995, 326). This layering is also mirrored in depicting space itself as stratified and pluralist, because desire materialises precisely in those settings where it is most likely to be violently censured.

This is reflected in the way Achmat talks about Boeta Dienie, his abusive neighbour, whom he develops an intense sexual attraction towards. One evening, Achmat follows Dienie into the yard’s shared toilet. Without explicitly stating, it is implied that Achmat simply watches him defecate, simultaneously disgusted and aroused by the erotic potential of this moment. Nothing violent or sexual transpires, for Achmat is called back by his mother. However, this moment is highly charged with possibility, and is exemplary of the kind of sexual formations that were always already present within stringent spatial arrangements during apartheid.

In the 1970s, during the process of separation between their parents, Achmat and his siblings had migrated to Salt River in Cape Town for the final time. A small suburban town just east of the city centre, it had already seen an influx of coloured population from District Six, who were forcefully removed by the government after the latter was designated as a white area in 1966. Just before Achmat recounts the encounter with Dienie, he talks about sharing a single-room flat with 12 other people, including his siblings, relatives, and maternal grandparents. He remembers how his grandfather would always terrorise his grandmother with threats of violence. This created an atmosphere of constant intimidation, which was further exacerbated by the scarcity of private space. But positing the memory of a potentially erotic moment alongside the

memory of persistent violence signifies a complicity between the materiality of both. As Andrew Tucker explains in his analysis of sexual formations within queer coloured communities in Cape Town, “Sharing of rooms and the close proximity of other dwellings means that the probability of being able to keep one’s sexuality private is lessened. A solution to this problem is to become overtly visible” (Tucker 2009, 90). While Achmat’s sexual subjectivity is not visible in the same valence as the cross-dressing queer subjects of Tucker’s inquiry, his rendition critiques the normative association of sexual alterity with “privacy” under the liberal rights framework. According to this, the state enacts an anti-rights violation by entering the supposed sovereignty of a bedroom inhabited by consenting adults. This postulation fails to take cognisance of the ways in which privacy itself operates as a function of power, echoing Foucault’s analysis of the privatisation of reproductive sexuality in the last three centuries, in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1978). Foucault explains how sex was made significant through the means of consistent public discourse, invocation, and standardisation. This manifested in a “[a] policing of sex: that is, not the rigor of a taboo, but the necessity of regulating sex through useful and public discourses” (Foucault 1978, 25). These frameworks of sovereignty, privacy, and sanctity are in distinct contrast with the erotic-political possibilities which Achmat remembers in his memoir. For most of his sexual encounters as a child and young adolescent occur in the aforementioned public spaces, willingly sought out of curiosity and fascination in an ethos where he is not permitted to express sexual desire openly.

This is significant because one of the many contentions based on which homosexuality is decried as a dangerous consequence of European colonialism, is that homosexual men practise paedophilia and child abuse. Achmat’s recurring assertion of willingly seeking sexual encounters as a child directly refutes this conflation. In an essay titled “The Exile of Adulthood: Pedophilia in the Midlife Novel” (1984), Margaret Morganroth analyses Mann’s novella and Vladimir Nobakov’s *Lolita* (1955), which represent a certain anxiety regarding adulthood as an irrevocable exile from childhood’s pristine paradise. According to her, “Behind every story of pedophilia is a drama of normal human regret at growing older in the body, distorted by the protagonist’s illusory attempt to circumvent his aging in *this* particular way, by trying to possess youth vicariously through the bodies of the young” (Morganroth 1984, 215). This framework explicitly situates childhood in a polar relationship with adulthood, signified through oppositional bodies inhabiting oppositional worlds. This analysis is also echoed within Lee Edelman’s critique of what he identifies as “reproductive futurism” in *No Future* (2004). Edelman explains how the dominant social order’s fetishisation of the child as an innocent and uncorrupted entity necessitates the production of queerness and nonreproductive sex as the abject death wish of such order. In such a framework, any drive towards futurity (which entails alignments across the political spectrum) inevitably involves the structural disciplining of that which embodies any form of libidinal excess. In his words, “the image of the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought” (Edelman 2004, 4). However, the register of

frankness and autonomy with which Achmat records sexual curiosity deconstructs the binary framings of such characterisation.

One of the significant sites of this defiance is the public washroom at the Observatory station, a “whites-only” facility that he is not allowed to use. Achmat distinctly records his fascination upon seeing drawings depicting men having sex with men on the doors of the washroom. He mentions how Islamic narratives conceptualise the toilet as a site of evil, which is to be warded off by reciting a prayer at times of entry and exit. At the train station, however, the orange-brown colour of the washroom’s doors is worked over by drawings and words that “celebrated” and “advertised sex between men” (Achmat 1995, 333). In this space, Achmat’s written subject both embraces its corporeality while also defying the racial faultlines of apartheid. He has sex with an adult white man, who initially refused to engage with him but relented after Achmat would not move away, reciting the songs written on the walls of the station. But he records this memory in a way that renders a highly politicised and material iteration of desire, within which multiple relations of power are reworked simultaneously. “He kissed me, he held me, but he would not hold out against me. He would not enter me, but he entered me ... He fucked me slowly, carefully but with tremendous power and passion” (Achmat 1995, 333). In repeatedly registering agency in this moment, he directly counters expectations of childish innocence, demureness, and the affective horror that such frankness might evoke in the reader. The reiteration of the song symbolises how the sexual subject is conceived spatially, reworking already-existing forms of segregation that were exacerbated after the Group Areas Act in 1950. One could, and validly so, critique the absence of accountability of his adult sexual partners in the narrative. At no point does Achmat hold them responsible for the power relations within which they are so unevenly positioned. Neither does the non-linear undergirding of his memories suggest any sense of doubt about their factuality. At the same time, it is worth noting that his writing subject locates as much agency in the willed pursuit of sexual curiosity as in the act of sex itself. In that context, his model of sexual subjecthood is far from valorised or prescriptive. This is substantiated by William L. Leap’s analysis of how coloured queer subjects navigated the tenuous relationship between sexuality, racial mobility, and citizenship. He explains how interracial points of sexual contact between white and coloured men did not necessarily translate in the complete disruption of racialised hierarchies. For most non-white and sexually dissident subjects, exiting the railway station toilet after a sexual encounter signified an entry back into the relationalities engendered by segregation (Leap 2002, 239). Similarly, the recurrent spatialisation of Achmat’s memories within the context of apartheid regulation prevents them from being narrativised as a reproducible framework of rebellion against excessive surveillance and control. As Achmat writes, “But Apartheid was not just about toilets. At ten I knew some things about apartheid. It was about sitting upstairs on the bus. It was about using separate entrances at the post office” (Achmat 1995, 333). Here, the writing subject undercuts the inherent risk of nostalgia present in the act of narrativising memories of sexual rebellion, refusing to relegate the sexual act in and as itself as a mode of resistance. In doing so, both his written and writing subjects embody Edelman’s radical

call to the queer subject, who “must insist on disturbing, on queering, social organisation as such—on disturbing, therefore, and on queering *ourselves* and our investment in such organization” (Edelman 2004, 14).

Achmat’s gesture also echoes Jack Halberstam’s conception of queer agents’ reconstructions of space-time in opposition to hetero-patriarchal production and uses of space (Halberstam 2005, 12). This kind of labile relationship between self and surroundings, where the subject displaces itself onto the latter’s physicality, seems to rework the co-relational conception of self and space that is represented in Mann’s *Death in Venice* ([1912] 1988). In his narrative, the atmospheric and physical decay of a cholera-plagued Venice symbolises the protagonist Aschenbach’s willed departure from a disciplined sense of subjecthood. In other words, the city’s degeneracy is reflective of the subject’s frazzled psychic state. At multiple instances, the atmospheric conditions directly foreshadow the subsequent choices the protagonist makes which ultimately culminate in his passing. Drawing from Halberstam, Daniel Marshall argues that Aschenbach’s decision to stay in Venice despite being aware of the epidemic and to continue his pursuit of Tadzio, his adolescent object of desire, is also a signifier of a sexually dissident agent wilfully redoing space-time. In his analysis, Aschenbach embodies a Nietzschean “overcoming of will, expressed not through a victory but an expression of the struggle itself” (Marshall 2015, 37). Therefore, it corresponds to queer reproductions of space and time. And yet, the narrative sustains this co-relational divide between the subject’s interiority and the externality of the space he inhabits through a narrative voice that constantly has authoritative access to Aschenbach’s inner-most thoughts. Even though the distance between them constantly fluctuates, this access is integral to the framework of premonition and foreshadowing Aschenbach’s eventual demise.

As Marshall explains, queer reproductions of space and time do not imply the creation or discovery of alternate or new spaces that are suited to dissident practices of desire and kinship. It is rather to constantly fracture normative spatio-temporal organisations of gender and sex. In that sense, doing space and time queerly becomes both the struggle and the will of the queer subject, as any specific spatio-temporal setting already inhabits an influx of power relations. Aschenbach’s willed descent, from a laboured and cultivated conscience of a disciplined artist to that of someone who makes choices without apprehension, mirrors the maze-like setting of early 20th-century Venice. This is symbolic of a very specific template of charting gay masculine geographies which found footing within the anonymity of the modern metropolis. There is an intriguing modernist characterisation of the metropolis itself, which is relevant to my analysis of Mann. Within modernist articulations such as George Simmel’s “The Metropolis and Mental Life” ([1903] 2004), the metropolis is considered as a space of recurring encounter, an onslaught of stimuli that forecloses objective distance between the inhabitant’s sense of subjecthood and the space in which he operates. To retain any possibilities of objectivity, the nature of contact and engagement within the metropolis is defensively impersonal, structured by practicalities of time and productivity. As

Simmel states, “the metropolitan type of man—which, of course, exists in a thousand individual variants—develops an organ protecting him against the threatening currents and discrepancies of his external environment which would uproot him” (Simmel [1903] 2004, 12). This essentialisation of impersonality further finds insistence within the ethnographic analysis of sexual encounters in public washrooms in America as described by Laud Humphreys in *Tearoom Trade* (1970). It is precisely the anonymity and impersonality of contact that form the basis of the sexual encounters that Humphreys analyses. From the spatial arrangement of the tearoom/toilet, its location, the timing, to the facial expressions and gestures of the participants who are ascribed different roles, everything is encoded within the bounds of time, mediated by possibilities of both persecution and success. It is within the ambit of such a structured relationship to space that a fabric of self-descriptions opens for the sexually dissident masculine flaneur. In Aschenbach’s case, the narrative voice keeps interspersing with his psychic state to intensify this element of urgency in erotic moments, while simultaneously also distancing itself to frame his relationship with the city-space within larger notions of death and decay. This structuration through time contrasts with the emotional charge and political possibilities of Achmat’s recollection of his sexual experiences as a child. In Achmat’s redoing of space-time, the self and the space it inhabits seem to merge with each other, reflected in the recurring spatio-temporal shifts.

This framework of fracturing the interior-exterior divide opens opportunities for reworking the influx of power relations that otherwise premised the space’s construction (racial, sexual, and moralist). For instance, Achmat mentions having sex with a white construction supervisor (Whitey) and a black worker (Khaya), both together and separately. “At first, they did not want to, like all other men. Then they insisted they’d only fuck me between the legs but eventually passion ruled and I would be happy. Less than five hundred meters from my parents’ home” (Achmat 1995, 334). This is significant because an interracial point of contact materialises within a site which, much like the toilet at the Observatory train station, has been overdetermined by racial segregation. In other words, its agency and titillation emanate not just from the fact of its non-heteronormativity but also its resistance to racialised structures. At the same time, the writing subject’s reflexive gaze prevents this moment from being idealised, by immediately shifting to a disparate spatio-temporal setting.

This highlights how Achmat’s writing subject is insistent on locating the memory spatially, as well as the multiple actors that inhabit it, thereby refusing singular readings of apartheid as a system of oppression and himself as an oppressed-repressed subject. This layeredness of space is integral because a highly labile rendition of queer self is being emplaced within it. Like the subject, then, the space is also rendered equally transient and repeatedly queered, without closure. The mutual constitution of self and spatiality not only protests apartheid’s control on space and movement but also reworks Mann’s model of space-time, within which space functions mainly as reflective of the protagonist’s psychic state. In Achmat’s autobiographical rendering, self and space

operate in a dialectical relationship with each other. The fluid autobiographical subject both gets shaped by and simultaneously reshapes the space he inhabits.

This relationality is one of the main elements through which Achmat's memoir critiques the construction of homosexuality as un-African, dangerous, and paedophilic. The undeniable centrality of public washrooms as a site of erotic agency within gay narratives points towards a specific creative aesthetic that confronts notions of sexual purity and chastity, which are foundationalised through race and gender. Additionally, the often-invoked trope of bodily functions further counters the pathologisation of sexual dissidence by highlighting the erotic potential of that which is deemed unclean and unsafe. In an ethos where "safe" channels of attaining sexual subjectivities remain reserved for the heterosexual adult, this is one of the ways in which hyper-surveilled bodies process and practise sexual desire. The fact that Achmat's written subject constantly seeks recourse to washrooms as sites of exploring sexual curiosity further critiques conceptions of children as too innocent for the desires they harbour. Why is this aspect important?

Achmat is writing just a few years before Thabo Mbeki, president of the country from 1999 to 2008 (also known as the years of AIDS denialism), comes into power. Mbeki's denialism of the causality between sexual transmission, contraction of the virus, and AIDS, and the prevention of access to antiretroviral (ARV) medicine, presents a curious case for interrogating the sexual dimensions of both coloniality and recuperative nationalism. In his analysis of Mbeki's 2002 speech, occasioned at Sarah Baartman's funeral and the National Women's Day, Neville Hoad locates one end of what he identifies as the "dialectic of sexual ideology of racism" (Hoad 2007, 94). In his speech, Mbeki emphatically critiques the hyper-sexualisation and animalisation of black bodies in European ethnographic discourses that fuelled justifications for colonial violence and conquest. Hoad analyses the way in which Mbeki's critique elides "[t]he other sexual ideology of racism, its fantasy of the meaning of whiteness ... sexual continuance, monogamy, companionate marriage, idealized romantic forms, what psychoanalysis might term sublimation" (Hoad 2007, 97). And yet, in that elision, a confounded discourse of respectability politics emerges that slips into sanitised productions of African sexuality. The reduction to sexual impulse gets introjected back onto black bodies. It is in this sphere that Hoad locates Mbeki's denialism of AIDS as a consequence of the sexual transmission of HIV. However, it would be erroneous to posit this denial in an oppositional relationship to Mbeki's pro-LGBT stance at multiple public instances. In fact, anti-apartheid activist Peter Tatchell credits Mbeki as one of the strongest voices in the ANC's more inclusive approach towards the cause for LGBT rights. In a 1987 letter, Mbeki responds to Tatchell's appeal for the ANC to shift its official stance by assuring him that the commitment towards liberation must also extend to gay citizens of a post-apartheid South Africa. In his own words, "As a movement, we are of the view that the sexual preferences of an individual are a private matter" (Tatchell 2016). This commitment towards the private rights of citizens in a liberated state is further reiterated in his public condemnation of Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Bill in

2009. A website called Global Gayz emphatically reports this with the headline, “Thabo Mbeki’s Pro Gay Statement Boosts Gay Rights Defenders in Uganda” (Ammon 2012). By reading Mbeki’s stance in a dialectical relationship with his denial of the extent of the AIDS crisis in South Africa, I do not intend to dismiss the former’s political relevance. At the same time, the relationship between legislative recognition accrued to queer bodies and the reality of hate crimes and everyday anti-queer discrimination in the “rainbow nation” warrants interrogation. What happens to sexual and gender dissident bodies when they acquire citizenship by entering into registers of state recognition? This recognition is symbolised by the inclusion of sexuality as one of the categories in the anti-discrimination clauses of the post-apartheid Constitution, the legal recognition of same-sex civil unions in 2006, and the 2018 Prevention and Combatting of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill. The recurring citation of these models of equality and the booming gay tourism industry in Cape Town aid in both the projection and positioning of the nation in the context of a globalised discourse of queer rights and justice. The register of this justice is based in a language of privacy, interiority, and ownership of property. It potently counters the prevalent understanding of homosexuality as un-African, circumstantial, and implicitly Western. And yet, hate crimes, discrimination, and harassment continue to rise contemporarily, in conjunction with continual racial unevenness in post-apartheid South Africa. It goes without saying that there are a number of factors in play here, including resurgence in religious intolerance, xenophobia, and a larger public discourse that is rooted in pathologisation and the reduction of sex and intimacy to epidemiological risk. However, the relationship between legislative protection, a framework of human rights that can only be invoked to translate injury into grievance, and the material reality of discrimination and unevenness cannot be simplified through the lens of disparity. Is it possible to locate a reintroduction of sexual respectability politics, also racially sutured, in the invocation of privacy as the modicum of pro-LGBT discourse? In Mbeki’s stance, and global discourse of queer rights, sexual dissidence is paradoxically rendered governable only by being outside the purview of the law, in the sanctity of private property. Where would Achmat’s dialectics of space and sexuality lie in this discourse of privatisation? His agentic embrace of sexual subjectivity, constantly located in sites of supposed uncleanness and impurity, resists both the racialised ethnographic construction of black bodies as well as the purifying filter that responds to such discourses. Achmat’s own work as an activist, including co-finding the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) that targeted issues of privatisation of healthcare and his refusal to take anti-retroviral medicine as part of TAC’s larger protests against Mbeki’s denialism, is relevant praxis to his narrativisation of sexual subjectivity in the memoir. If cultures of illicit public sex, framed within images and discourses of animality, are figured as deviations from the virtuosity of private reproductive sex, then, as Edelman suggests, it is within the supposed “illicitness” and excessive animality of those cultures that possibilities of resistance are also found.

In Mann’s novella, the unsafe and unhygienic climate of Venice is not dangerous enough to bring his falling protagonist back into a state of cultivated virtue. For it is

important that his pursuit of the adolescent Tadzio leads to his demise, which is spatially foreshadowed throughout the narrative. Tadzio becomes an object of Aschenbach's desire because in the latter's view, it is Tadzio who continues to emanate innocence and godliness in an otherwise degenerating space. A number of times, Mann associates Tadzio with mythical figures, speaks of his blonde hair, smooth armpits, and the weak flesh-like bodily appearance to symbolise his yet untainted and virtuous state. "Day after day now the naked god with the hot cheeks drove his fire-breathing quadriga across the expanses of the sky, and his yellow locks fluttered in the assault of the east wind" (Mann [1912] 1998, 234). The only point of contact that is established between the two is when Tadzio smiles back at a captivated Aschenbach, who then spirals into intense romantic longing. These possibilities would perhaps not hold if Tadzio were to reciprocate or express awareness of Aschenbach's physical attraction or embody sexual agency in the way Achmat's written subject does. Towards the end, Aschenbach's futile attempt to regain lost youth by colouring his hair and applying extensive make-up is in stark contrast to the sombre guise with which the narrator began his journey. This moment is also described ironically, in a slightly heightened and grandiose style, to highlight its futility. And it breaks directly into descriptions of thickened air, stormy weather, and rotten smells to foreshadow his impending demise.

This recurrent trope of prefiguration almost renders a cautionary edge to the narrative. In contrast, Achmat's mode of remembering his sexual encounters with older men constantly registers the joy, sadness, excitement, curiosity, and fascination that his written subject harbours. Even though there is a certain tenderness with which he remembers his younger self, there is not a single moment where he is recorded as passive or uncertain about what he is expressing and practising. This is most symbolised when Achmat's writing subject has sex with Don, whom he recognises as the white South African navy worker whom he already had had sex with when he was an adolescent. From Don's partner's name, the name of his pet, his occupation to his address, he remembers all the details revealed during their previous encounter, which gives Don the impression that Achmat was working for the apartheid regime's military. On the one hand, it is suggestive of the 1970s administration's extreme efforts towards regulation and control. However, Achmat also registers his protest for the same by creating space for problematising these points of contact, whose power relations would otherwise only posit him as the innocent, passive "other."

In doing so, Achmat presents a framework of creative-political labour that operates in defiance of a series of cultural scripts. Marshall refers to the canonisation of Mann's novella as representing an archetype of the modern homosexual male as he charts out a geography that can anchor his sexual subjecthood. This archetype has been inherited as a descriptive identificatory space for the figure of the modern masculine gay flaneur. Dianne Chisholm charts an interesting history of how dissident queer subjects in North American contexts constellate the progressive fantasies of urban development and gentrification, in her book *Queer Constellations* (2004). Relevant to my interpretation of Achmat's narrative is her explanation of how queer subjects confront the

essentialisation of constant mobility within the city as a central tenet of gay masculine geographies. Through “jarring stops ... where forgotten passages of youthful socialism are contrasted with present scenes of capitalist and fascist development,” the dissident queer renders visible the material and cultural catastrophe that is wreaked in the name of renovation and gentrification of urban space (Chisholm 2004, 36). Although in a different context, Achmat’s model of spatialising sexual desire, specifically through those jarring and unprecedented narrative shifts, expresses agency against both his racialisation and hyper/desexualisation. However, attempting to read a reproductive frame of resistance in the memoir, which can be inherited or become a model of identification, goes against its strategic formal fluidity. As Marshall writes, “If space and time is designated queer through departures from logics of reproduction and heredity, then what implications does our inheritance of spatialized historical homosexual masculinities have for such theories?” (Marshall 2015, 43).

In *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (2020), Zakkiyah Iman Jackson explores the different ways in which black diasporic art both critiques and reconfigures the racial foundations of what constitutes as human and non-human in scientific epistemology since the Enlightenment. Writing against a history of excessive animalisation and bestialisation, Jackson’s primary texts argue for something more than the expansion of the category of “human” to include erstwhile dehumanised bodies and subjects. For instance, in her analysis of Octavia Butler’s “Bloodchild,” a short story published in 1995, Jackson locates a reconfigured model of the dehumanised subject’s relationship to itself. Critiquing the framework in which the possession of “self” is also the source of conscious subjectivity, Jackson describes how “claims to self-ownership are paradoxical in that they reject the master’s authority but not the property relation” (Jackson 2020, 143). In other words, liberal humanist thought still frames the self’s relationship to its subject in a discourse of knowability, ownership, and by extension, private property. The freedom of identity and knowing oneself is materialised through the invocation, yet again, of privacy. Identity and ownership continue to reinforce each other. This analysis puts the autobiographical space in quite a contentious position, especially considering Achmat’s own ancestry as a descendant of slaves brought to Cape Town by the Dutch East India Company, from different regions bordering the Indian Ocean. Gabea Baderoon argues how the history of two centuries of slavery in the Cape, rendered obscure through the dominance of the history of apartheid in the country’s collective historical consciousness, continues the system’s appropriation of slave bodies as surplus, in excess, and disposable (Baderoon 2018, 258). These frameworks of expendability continued in the apartheid era, and with them, their reduction of non-white bodies to notions of dirt, waste, and decay that provided discursive-material approval for violence and regulation. In that context, Achmat’s refusal of linearity, and such refusal’s site as a public toilet in a racialised space, counters both the disposability of his body and the frames of emancipation that would posit him as a liberated subject only within the sanctity of his bedroom. The lack of stable self-grounding in the narrative further relocates queerness from notions of interiority and identification to spaces of possibility, for remaking both the self and world. But queerness is not oriented

towards a more inclusive future in a linear or progressive way. Thinking of queerness as possibility also reframes one's relationship to the past, for it is instilled with a critique of the historically continuous violence of queer erasure and urban development. If Marshall's conception states that any space is always already structured through relations of power, Achmat's framings of memory highlight how that structuration is also always haunted by the modalities of resistance. These modalities, as one notices in Achmat's text, can only be glimpsed or hinted at, but never fully reproduced or acquired.

As mentioned previously, there are many spatio-temporal shifts in the narrative, such that both the written and the writing subject occupy multiple positionalities simultaneously. This is to signify a conception of self that is constantly aware, and reflexive of its own becoming. Within its frame of referentiality, the autobiographical subject diverts from a specific inhabited setting to an incident mentioned previously, registering a sense of self that is continually processing its past. This move away from linear narrations of the self is heightened the most at the narrative's close. In the end, Achmat mentions the significance of 1976, the year of the student uprising in Soweto and subsequently in other parts of the country, as a year of his political awakening. After returning from a site of protest that was violently confronted by the police, Achmat is further beaten up by his mom and aunt, who explain to him that as a child, he cannot confront the Boers with his "bare hands" (Achmat 1995, 341). This moment is followed by the tender memory of having sex with the watchman who sheltered him that night. The memoir ends with, "In those years I discovered that sex is a political act and that, as moffies and letties, we had to be a part of a revolution to change everything. It was the beginning of a life of sex and politics" (Achmat 1995, 341). This choice, to end the memoir with the mention of a "beginning" signifies open-endedness and a willed move away from telos, and a framework of "hinting-haunting," whose intended fluidity prevents it from becoming an iconography for a politics of liberation. Instead of definitional template, Achmat opens up a generative space within which multiple possibilities of resistance are initiated. In other words, the objective of redoing space and time queerly is not to enable the acquisition of a certain kind of liberated subjecthood or practice. The redoing itself is the objective, to prevent a move away from the normative to be reproduced as another template.

Furthermore, Achmat's insistence on spatial and material signifiers prevent his understanding of a "labile" selfhood from becoming an inaccessible abstraction. Instead, his use of lability renders selfhood as that which can be hinted at but not fully apprehended, by locating it within its context, which is also shifting continually. The subject does not operate within the ambit of an essence which it is aware of. Rather, the very act of writing the self becomes a medium to delve within the "impossibility" of such epistemic authority. This absence, instead of being perceived in terms of a lack, rather opens up space for the politicisation of not only a "universal" master narrative of racialisation but also the possibilities of resistance against it. It enables one to interrogate the network of power relations that are instilled within the most minute and daily moments of negotiating structural oppression. However, it is also within the daily and

the immediate, rather than the grand narratives of self-making, that those labile possibilities of resistance may be hinted towards.

References

- Achmat, Zackie. 1995. "My Childhood as an Adult Molester: A Salt River Moffie." In *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*, edited by Edwin Cameron and Mark Gevisser, 325–341. New York: Routledge.
- Ammon, Richard. 2012. "Thabo Mbeki's Pro-Gay Statement Boosts Gay Rights Defenders in Uganda." *Global Gayz*, January 25. Last modified January 25, 2012. <https://archive.globalgayz.com/africa/uganda/thabo-mbekis-pro-gay-statement-boosts-gay-rights-defenders-in-uganda/>.
- Baderoon, Gabeba. 2018. "Surplus, Excess, Dirt: Slavery and the Production of Disposability in South Africa." In "The Cultural Politics of Dirt in Africa (Continued)," edited by Stephanie Newell and Louise Green, special issue, *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies* 44 (2): 257–272. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2018.1494243>.
- Chisholm, Dianne. 2004. *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Edelman, Lee. 2004. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822385981>.
- Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Gullette, Margaret Morganroth. 1984. "The Exile of Adulthood: Pedophilia in the Midlife Novel." *A Forum of Fiction* 17 (4): 215–232. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1345748>.
- Halberstam, Jack. 2005. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press.
- Hoad, Neville. 2007. *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality and Globalisation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Humphreys, Laud. 1970. *Tearoom Trade: A Study of Homosexual Encounters in Public Spaces*. London: Duckworth. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02812336>.
- Jackson, Zakkiyah Iman. 2020. *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*. New York: New York University Press. <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479873623.001.0001>.
- Künster, H. G., J. P. Swanevelde, and A. Van Middelkoop. 1998. "National HIV Surveillance in South Africa—1993–1995." *South African Medical Journal* 88 (10): 1316–1320.

- Leap, William L. 2002. "'Strangers on a Train': Sexual Citizenship and the Politics of Public Transportation in Apartheid Cape Town." In *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*, edited by Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin F. Manalansan, 234–250. New York: New York University Press.
- Mann, Thomas. 1998. *Death in Venice and Other Stories*. London: Vintage.
- Marshall, Daniel. 2015. "Beating Space and Time: Historical Gay Sex and Queer Cultural Geographies of Masculinities." *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 20 (1): 33–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2015.1017374>.
- Simmel, George. 2004. "The Metropolis and Mental Life." In *The City Cultures Reader*, edited by Malcolm Miles, Tim Hall, and Iain Borden, 12–19. London: Routledge.
- Tatchell, Peter. 2016. "How the ANC Was Won for LGBT Rights." Peter Tatchell Foundation, April 20. Last modified February 20, 2019. <https://www.petertatchellfoundation.org/south-africa-how-the-anc-was-won-for-lgbt-rights/>.
- Tucker, Andrew. 2009. *Queer Visibilities: Space, Identity and Interaction in Cape Town*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444306187>.